

ALTERNATIVE STRUCTURES IN A MIXED LANGUAGE:  
BENEFACTIVES AND DUBITATIVES IN MICHIF

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Michif is the name given to a language spoken on the Turtle Mountain Indian Reservation, located in North Dakota on the Canadian border. The number of speakers is uncertain, but has been estimated in the hundreds, primarily people over the age of 40 (Rhodes 1977). The language is also known as French-Cree or Turtle Mountain Cree, but "Michif" is the term most commonly used by its speakers.

The question of exactly what Michif is is still open to some debate. The name comes from Metis, and the language is certainly a product of the Metis culture; it has been termed a creole, a dialect of Cree, and a mixture of languages (Crawford 1981). I propose that it is not precisely any of these things, but is rather a true mixed language.

Michif contains elements of French and of Cree in phonology, lexicon, and structure. The domain of the noun phrase is French; almost all Cree nouns have been replaced by French, along with adjectives, articles, and prepositions. French gender distinction has been maintained, so that all nouns are masculine or feminine, and the phonology of Michif French words is still that of Canadian French (Crawford 1981; Peske 1981). The verb structure is Cree, and syntax is primarily Cree. Demonstrative pronouns are also Cree, and maintain the Algonkian inanimate-animate gender system, so that all nouns are assigned two types of gender marking. The animate-inanimate distinction is also shown on person and number markings on verbs. Phonology of the Cree words is that of the y-dialect of Plains Cree (Crawford 1981; Rhodes 1977).

A fairly concise traditional definition of pidgin and creole languages can be found in Todd (1972:2,3):

A pidgin is a marginal language which arises to fulfill certain restricted communication needs among people who have no common language. In the initial stages of contact the communication is often limited to transactions where a detailed exchange of ideas is not required and where a small vocabulary, drawn almost exclusively from one language suffices. The syntactic structure of the pidgin is less complex and less flexible than the structures of

the languages which were in contact, and though many pidgin features clearly reflect usages in the contact languages others are unique to the pidgin.

A creole arises when a pidgin becomes the mother tongue of a speech community. The simple structure that characterized the pidgin is carried over into the creole but since a creole, as a mother tongue, must be capable of expressing the whole range of human experience, the lexicon is expanded and frequently a more elaborate syntactic system evolves.

Michif quite clearly does not fit this definition. First, the vocabulary does not come from one language; it comes from two in a regular and categorized division of lexicon and grammar. Second, there is no evidence that it ever went through the period of simplification and subsequent expansion typical of pidginization and creolization (Crawford 1981:10). Voorhoeve, in his "Note on Reduction and Expansion in Grammar" (1971:188) has stated that it is not possible to compare a creole to the languages it came from because of this period of simplification and expansion, but Michif can be quite easily compared, in structure and lexicon, to Cree and to French, and no major differences will be found.

Richard Rhodes in a 1977 paper "French-Cree: A Case of Borrowing", calls Michif a dialect of Plains Cree, with extensive borrowing from French. It is clear from his illustration that the Cree of Michif is Plains Cree; he also demonstrates the relatively greater influence of Cree on Michif syntax. John Crawford (1981: 14) has pointed out as well the sociolinguistic considerations which point to Cree as the central or most significant part of Michif. Nonetheless, I think it simplistic to term the language a case of borrowing when the scale of the borrowing is as enormous as it is in Michif.

To term Michif a mixture of languages is also inaccurate, in that it implies a randomness in the mixing. There is nothing at all random in the mixing of French and Cree in Michif; there is a consistent and regular division between which elements are Cree and which are French.

Hans Wolff commented in 1959: "...Linguistic hybridism of the perfect amalgam type, though often claimed..has never...been satisfactorily demonstrated...the rise of the perfect linguistic hybrid does require the possibility of acquisition en bloc of structural characteristics." Michif has made just such an acquisition, the noun phrase in all its structural complexity, from French. Greenberg (1955:2,3) commented "If such words [fundamental

vocabulary] were borrowed freely, one might expect that on some occasions A might show many resemblances to B and at the same time to C, while B and C were totally unlike. In other words A would be a *Mischsprache* of elements of B and C. This never seems to occur." I propose that it does occur in Michif; an examination of nouns would lead one to believe Michif is related to French; of verbs, to Cree. On the basis of these definitions of a mixed language and the characteristics found in Michif, I propose that Michif is in fact a truly mixed language.

Because it has sub-structures from two distinctly different languages, there are several areas where Michif speakers have a choice as to their means of expression. The remainder of this paper will deal with two such alternative structures, benefactives and dubitatives.

In Cree, as in all Algonkian languages, there are four basic verb types defined on the basis of transitivity and gender. The gender distinction for intransitive verbs is based on the actor, so that there are AI verbs, or intransitive verbs with animate actors, and II verbs, intransitive verbs with inanimate actors. The transitive verbs are distinguished by the gender of the goal, forming the other two types, TA verbs, transitive verbs with animate goals, and TI verbs, transitive verbs with inanimate goals (Wolfart 1973:38). Because Michif has maintained the gender system of Cree, these four types occur in Michif as well.

There is a second type of TA verb in Cree, a three-place or double-goal verb. In addition to the animate actor and goal, the three place verb has a second goal, expressed through the suffix *-aw-*, which may be of either gender or number (Wolfart 1973:39), for example *kjmotamawew* 'he steals it or him from him.' These verbs are also called "benefactives", as the expressed animate goal of the derived stem is the beneficiary of the action. Benefactives are derived from TI verbs with a suffix *-aw-* which follows the TI theme sign *-am-*, so that from the root *-atot-* 'tell of' comes the TA form *atotamawew* 'he tells of it for him'; similarly, *manisamawew* 'he cuts it from or for him' from *manis-* 'cut'. Benefactives may also be derived from AI stems by adding the TI suffix *-st-* and the above suffix, so that for example from the AI stem *mōskī-* 'come forth' come the derived TI stem *mōskīst-* 'come forth towards it, attack it' and finally the TA form *mōskīstamawew*, 'he attacks it for him' (Wolfart 1973:75).

This process is common and (probably) productive in Michif as well. All of the informants were able to provide TI forms and corresponding benefactive TA forms; for example, *utinam* 'he takes it' and *utinamawew* 'he takes it for him'; *uciminam* 'he holds it' and *uciminamawew* 'he takes it for him'. However, because Michif

has a set of prepositions from French, it has an alternative method of expressing the concept of benefaction. Thus, forms such as kī-pakamahən por wiya 'he hit it for him' and kī-nahaštaw por liz ot 'he put it away for him' (literally 'for those others') co-exist with the Cree forms.

The second case of alternate available verb forms occurs in an inflectional category, the dubitative. In his 1946 sketch of Algonkian (97-103), Bloomfield discusses briefly the dubitative mode of the independent order and a separate order, the interrogative. Ellis (1961) has proposed that the interrogative order be reclassified in Cree as the dubitative mode of the conjunct order, pointing out that the inflectional affixes of the interrogative "order" are no more different from the conjunct indicative than the inflection of the independent dubitative from the independent indicative (p. 120). Wolfart (1973:41-44) concurs with this rejection of the interrogative order for Cree, but suggests that there is higher level opposition of dubitative versus non-dubitative in the conjunct order, rather than Ellis' three-way coordinate scheme with indicate, subjunctive and dubitative.

The dubitative in Cree encompasses a wide range of meanings, as shown in these forms from Wolfart (1973:44): nīpēhikawīnātokē 'I wonder if they are waiting for me'; kaskēyihtamōtokēnik aniki nitēhtāwāw 'surely those co-parents-in law of mine must be lonely'; tānisi ē-itinikēkwē 'I wonder how he is faring'.

Ellis (1971:89-93) presents a complete paradigm for the dubitative in Swampy and Moose Cree. Wolfart's data on Plains Cree (1973:44) are less complete; his paradigm contains only 13 forms, comprising both the independent and conjunct orders. Wolfart notes as "striking" the use of the dubitative particle ētokwē, which he sites as occurring ten times more frequently in the texts he collected in Alberta in 1967-1968 than in Bloomfield's Plains Cree texts, and goes on to ask if there is a decline in the frequency of dubitative verb forms correlating with an increase in the frequency of the non-verbal dubitative marker ētokwē.

This certainly appears to be the case in Michif. I did not record a single occurrence of a dubitative verb form; however, etikwē (the Michif version of ētokwē) was extremely common, giving forms such as kī-tikiwēw etikwē, 'he probably went home', i-eško-siwak etikwē, 'they are probably tired', and nipaw etikwē, 'he must be sleeping'. The dubitative is also commonly expressed using French forms, for example pasi kī-wāpatam, or si pasi kī-wāpatam, or si pasi kī-wāpatam (c'est possible); 'I wonder if he saw it', and zə pas nipaw, 'he must be sleeping'.

In the case of benefactives, the Cree forms seem to be far more common in Michif than the French, occurring an estimated 95% of the time. This may have been due to the method of elicitation, as I requested first a TI or AI verb and then the corresponding TA benefactive; French forms tended to occur after a large number of forms had been elicited, when the informant began to tire, and in cases where the informant seemed somewhat hesitant about the first form (the TI or AI form). However, with common verbs the informants were all quick to provide a TA benefactive, leading me to conclude that they are in fact common in everyday speech.

For dubitatives the situation is somewhat more complex. Frequency of occurrence of French forms and Cree forms appears to be more nearly equal, and all informants used both. The number of French forms relative to Cree seems to increase with the proficiency in French which the informant claims and with the amount of French--either through relatives or mission schools--in her background. It is interesting that the only translation which consistently occurred with French forms was 'I wonder', which was given as pasi or si pasi.

The fact that I obtained no dubitative verb forms should not be taken to imply that the dubitative paradigm no longer exists in Michif. It does suggest, however, that it is not in common use having been largely replaced by etikwē and French forms.

These two cases help to demonstrate the complexity of Michif as a language, and reinforce the idea of the coexistence of two entirely different systems of structure and lexicon. Considerable work remains to be done on Michif in the areas of structure and historical linguistics, but even more important, I believe, are the socio-linguistic implications of a mixed language such as Michif, and the effect that the existence of such a language will have on our theories of the development of languages.

#### NOTE

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